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ABSTRACT

As their graduates assume increasingly powerful civic and career positions, community colleges should utilize alumni as potential sources of fiscal and community support. To do so requires an alumni affairs organization through which the college and its alumni can be of help to each other. Colleges can provide former students with opportunities for involvement in alumni or advisory committees and can offer continuous services in the areas of placement, lifelong learning, continuing professional education, and job retraining. Alumni, for their part, can donate money and real property and can aid the college in developing political support, fostering positive public opinion, recruiting new students, identifying employment opportunities for graduates, and locating possible donors to the college. Though there is no established formula for success in alumni affairs, several guidelines should be followed: (1) the president and entire college community should be committed to the endeavor: (2) a staff person should be assigned to alumni affairs: (3) funding must be made available: (4) a newsletter or other form of communication with alumni should be established: and (5) faculty should retain contact with former students. Such efforts ensure that the college provides adequate service to a sizable portion of its constituency. (JP)

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THE ALUMNI -- AN UNTAPPED RESERVOIR OF SUPPORT

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THE ALUMNI -- AN UNTAPPED RESERVOIR OF SUPPORT

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Widespread community support is essential for the maintenance of public community colleges. Utilizing countless activities, colleges court the understanding and goodwill of the citizens of their service areas. The purpose of their image building or marketing, which virtually all colleges actively foster in a wide variety of forms, is an attempt to enhance and maintain the support of people. We, in community colleges, increasingly need the type of goodwill that translates itself into students and sufficient money to support programs that these students need.

Community colleges will no longer be supported merely for their existence---merely because some of us believe that these colleges are the latest manifestation of the American Dream. Too many other institutions are actively attempting to assume at least selective portions of the community college mission.

This paper suggests that administrators of community colleges should not think narrowly or traditionally as they develop and implement plans to mold positive public opinion. Notwithstanding all of the positive good that can be accomplished by utilizing traditional methods of extensive media exposure and carefully planned recruiting techniques, it would be a mistake to assume that either the staffs of the colleges or that active trustees can or must do it all themselves. The benefits of using additional

indirect approaches should not be overlooked. For example, the alumni should be used. Alumni are both members of the college family and members of the greater community. These individuals live, vote, pay taxes, get elected to public office and perhaps, most importantly, talk to other people and influence their views. These other people are also members of the greater community. Alumni can be a potent force in molding public opinion.

Private institutions, land grant universities, and many state colleges long ago recognizedthe potential value to their continuing health and wellbeing of their former students. Community colleges should also move to harness this potential source in a systematic way. The approaches to organize these alumni that should be used must be typically community college in orientation. That is to say that they should take from the traditional that which is applicable and add the non-traditional aspects that have become the hallmark of the community college movement.

Unsuccessful attempts to organize members of original graduating classes of a few pioneer community colleges should not prevent or dissuade new attempts. The position and status of the community college and its graduates differ greatly in number and in kind today from those of past decades. The most important difference is simple, but monumental. Community colleges have aged and multiplied as have their alumni. Given an effective organizational structure, it is age and numbers that are the key to effectiveness in alumni affairs. Prestige, status and social power of people as well as institutions, tend to increase in any community with the

passage of time. The community college person is increasingly ascending to power positions in our communities and these same individuals are simply increasing in numbers. These two facts dictate that community college alumni need to be systematically organized to support their colleges.

If the retention of students is important, as we are learning, then the retention of alumni is equally important. These people are an untapped reservoir of support.

Alumni Affairs: The Concept

Alumni affairs need to be viewed in a broad conceptual framework. There are two basic aspects to the relationship areas where the college helps and is of service to the individual, and areas in which the individual helps and is of service to the college. Both the individual and the college must be able to identify and demonstrate a sense of being able to give and to receive for the relationship to be fruitful.

Areas Where The College Can Help Individuals

The college that is endeavoring to continue its relationship to its former students should continue to provide help and assistance in as many of the following ways as is possible. And it is important that the definition of who is an alumnus should be consistent with the comprehensive philosophy of the community college. Inclusiveness is central. I argue for a definition that would take in anyone who has enrolled in more than four or five courses at the college. The need for barriers are unnecessary.

Alumni are a self-selecting group, and people who do not wish to be associated will quickly opt out. Some of the activities that might be provided include the following:

1. The college should establish and maintain ways in which the alumni can keep up a continuous relationship with the college through the people the individual knew at the college. These people most often will be former classmates, but they can also include faculty and administrators. For some individuals, this need can be satisfied by active involvement and participation in the traditional structure and operations of an alumni association, its committees and sub-groups. Others, and probably the largest proportion, like the camaraderie that is inherent with the traditional class activities and social, cultural, and recreational affairs that are the common fare of most four-year college associations.

   Far more people, however, need other avenues to maintain their interest and involvement with the college. These other contact points might include:

   a. participation on professional or programmatic advisory committees,

   b. the receipt of tailored literature and publications concerning their program and/or profession or the college, and

   c. continuing professional involvement with faculty through seminars and workshops for active practitioners.

It should be noted that for institutions that enroll thousands of individuals, the identification of faculty who are interested in maintaining contact with former students is the key to establishing ongoing relationships. Alumni wish to relate to that group of people at the college that they knew most well while they were in attendance. This need, therefore, calls for an approach that must be decentralized and must be based on some organizing unit that reflects the institution as they knew it.

2. The college should provide continuous services to the alumni such as the following:

   a. Placement. In many fields, advancement for associate degree individuals can most effectively be achieved by changing employers. The college can serve its former students and also indentify changes in the labor market by providing former students with continuing placement services. Basically, the college must accept the philosophical position that it should assume more of a placement responsibility than to assist the students identify their initial job. This service can be costly, the advisability of a fee is obviously dependent upon the financial condition of the college.

   b. Lifelong Learning. The lifelong learning needs of the alumni are a prime market for interest-type programming. There are those who argue convincingly that community

colleges should not really admit to having alumni. These advocates state that the community college merely has many students who are not currently enrolled. The concept is not without merit. Alumni, as all people, have interest in acquiring skills and understandings in areas outside of their primary occupational fields that can be met at the college. This service provides the best kind of bridge for the individual back to the school for the alumni gets reinvolved actively with the institution.

c. Continuing Professional Education. The community college, as the institution that provides pre-service education in a myriad of fields is in the best position to provide the on-going in-service training in these same fields. The provision of this type of service is, or should be, a basic mission of the community college in the 80's. Alumni need continual professional upgrading and training to remain current and therefore competitive in the marketplace. These programs, once established, benefit the college in at least two other ways. They allow the faculty to maintain their own disciplinary currency by the necessity of preparing and teaching material that is typically outside of the pre-service curricula, and the program further provides the alumni with an opportunity to maintain contact

with other former students who are now practitioners in the field and who may be of benefit to them in their job situations.

d. Retention. As the economic conditions of communities change with the resultant displacement or underemployment of previously trained community college individuals, retraining becomes important. Alumni who are trained in fields that may now be less marketable, should be able to look to the community college for training that will prepare them for major changes in career patterns. The needed training may well be accommodated in the short term programs currently being developed by many schools.

e. Civic Service. Colleges should create opportunities for alumni to exercise their talent and obligation for civic service by working for the college. Service on advisory committees, special task forces and other college related activities provide the individual with a chance to both fulfill a need to serve and also an opportunity to be of help. All individuals need opportunities to re-enforce their self-worth, and community colleges have too long overlooked their own former students in this vital area.

Areas Where Alumni Can Help the College

A. Gifts of Money and Real Property

Alumni should be afforded the opportunity to contribute to worthy projects to satisfy individual needs. Colleges should maintain foundations or other mechanisms to stimulate active giving and alumni should be challenged and nurtured to become active donors. This is a very traditional function but one that is very important. A rationale for those who wonder why they should urge or contribute to a public community college follows.

All public colleges supported by tax dollars receive about the same amount of financial support. Therefore if no other resources are available, all colleges will become about the same in quality and quantity. Only by using funds received from private sources can the college do those extra things that can make it truly excellent. A relatively small contribution to a community college can and does produce tremendous returns. Alumni should be appraised of this opportunity to make their college even more excellent. The NCACC Foundation, for example, receives about $50,000 per year in its annual fund drive. Of that amount, annually there is a $1,000 gift from the alumni association to the alumni association endowment, and in addition, individual gifts from alumni. Although individual gifts are not at this time large, interest is growing and the money that is contributed does make a significant difference in the programs of the institution.

B. Political Power

Even a small but realtively well organized alumni association can be a tremendous political force in a county. It is axiomatic that local politicians live by the vote and they listen to local people on a local issue. In any small geographic area, with a relatively stable total population, a community college alumni association that is increasing yearly in numbers has the potential to become very effective with local politicians. Using Northampton County, Pennsylvania, as an example, the County has a total population of approximately 220,000 people. In the 13 years of the college's existence, more than 100,000 people, conservatively, have enrolled in courses. If only 5% of these people are organized, the results on critical issues can be persuasive.

What can alumni do? Again let Northampton College be an example. The College, along with the other Pennsylvania community colleges, needed the enactment of a state law to increase the operating budget funding formula. Our alumni proved their effectiveness politically in the following ways:

1. By organizing a mail campaign to elected officials urging support of the bill. The voice of the people was heard, for these officials asked the college to "call off" the campaign for they supported the position of the institution.

2. The alumni organized a mail campaign across the state which stimulated the alumni of other community colleges to act.

3. A very effective petition was circulated and signed by over 8,000 individuals and sent to appropriate state officials.

4. A myriad of letters to local editors of newspapers were written and published.

5. Members of the alumni attended public meetings and effectively expressed the view of the college.

The tremendous strength of community college alumni are that they live in the community and they know, are friends, and associate with the people of the community. Local politicians are influenced by this type of sentiment.

Perhaps the most important political power of the alumni association is that they are, or could be, registered voters and have the power of the ballot box. There is no other strength that is collectively so strong in our democracy.

Community college alumni can also become public officials and can become effective policy makers.

Public Opinion

Notwithstanding the tremendous influence of national media on formulating opinions, locally, public opinion is still formulated most often

by people talking over the back fence. Conversations of individuals in stores, barbershops, fire halls and churches are central in most communities in the public opinion molding process on local issues. Again, a relatively small but organized alumni association can be of tremendous influence.

Services That Alumni Can Give

1. Alumni can be effective recruiters of students at their work-place, with their families and in their neighborhoods. Researched studies continue to document the obvious, word of mouth is still the most effective recruiting instrument of the community college.

2. Alumni have a tremendous opportunity to identify employment opportunities for graduates. They work and are practitioners in the fields that are being trained at the college for local firms. They have first hand information about what the job market is and can become.

3. Identification of possible donors. Alumni can be an invaluable source of potential donors to the Foundation or the college. This is especially true if corporate gifts are being sought.

4. Boards of Trustees, Presidents and senior officers of community colleges must begin to use alumni as sources of advice and guidance. The value of this type of utilization is obvious and other segments of higher education have used the format for years.

Possible specific ways of utilization would include the following:

a. Service on professional and/or subject matter advisory committees.

b. Service on the Board of Trustees and/or boards and committees of the college foundation

c. Advisory committee to the President. The Executive committee of the alumni can serve in a very real way as eyes and ears for the President and the college in the community.

A Caution

The organization and implementation of an ongoing alumni program is froth with frustration. The tremendous influence for good an organized alumni can have, however, is a compelling reason to support it. There are continuing problems. There are no established formula about how to organize and no proven axioms about what works. The methods being used across the country vary. The success of each organizational structure seems to be dependent upon the college, its leadership and its willingness to make the program work. What seems to be emerging is a consistent pattern of what the college needs to do to make an organization succeed. These "needs" can be summarized as follows:

1. The President must be committed to the endeavor and be willing to make this activity an institutional priority. Across the country, few alumni associations develop in a comprehensive manner without the active involvement of the college president.

2. The college must assign a specific staff person to coordinate alumni affairs. This individual must have a number of talents, including

good interpersonal relations, good communication skills and a fine sense of organization. It seems essential that this individual must also have the confidence of the President, and the Board of Trustees. The person must further have easy access to these individuals. Although it is unlikely that most community colleges can allocate to alumni affairs a full time person, it is clear that an individual must be identified and that individual must have status in the organization commensurate with the priority of the effort.

3. The conceptual value of the alumni association must be advocated to the total college community by the president and the alumni person. This is a difficult task, for the college community tends to dismiss alumni work as frivolous and without real value to the overall endeavor.

4. Money for support of the organization must be made available by the college. Few alumni associations can really be self-sufficient. Most of the indirect services that are essential to the development of the association must be carried by the college. It is argued that these costs should be considered a part of public information and recruitment.

5. A strong system of communication with alumni members is essential. An effective alumni association must have an effective method of communicating on a systematic and periodic basis with all of its membership. The association needs a periodic newsletter or journal. The format of the document must be locally determined, but the information must be current, correct, and on going. The journal or newsletter must contain more than information about people. It must be viewed by the

college as an important vehicle for communicating information about the college to the community on a systematic basis. Messages to the alumni must be as carefully planned as any other document at the institution. If the alumni staff member is not on the public relations staff, then the coordination of this individual with that staff must be exceedingly close. The alumni quarterly and/or newsletter must be given a priority by the public relations staff, and all publication costs must be paid for by the college.

6. The college must develop a cadre of long time staff members willing to provide bridges to the alumni. Community college students are program oriented as students and they remain so as alumni. Faculty members therefore in each of the different disciplines and/or professional areas provide a key point of contact. It is here suggested that a key to the uniqueness of the two year college alumni association is the development of interest groups based on academic programs. These former students share a need for continuing professional education and also the need for advancement and recognition in the field. Interest groups of the alumni association allow some of these needs to be fulfilled. Conceptually, this follows the model of the four year college's use of geographic areas for the basis of organization.

7. The college must be willing to continue to experiment and to expend human and material resources.

The risks and frustrations of establishing and maintaining an active alumni association are however worth the effort for not only are they an important part of the college family, but they are also fast becoming a significant portion of the college's total service area population. If a college serves its alumni it is serving its community!

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